

Hello, thank you, goodnight

"Inside a comfortable shell."

Lego

8:00

The morning sun filtered through my curtains in soft golden stripes, painting patterns across the floor like scattered petals. I stretched beneath the covers, feeling the pleasant ache of a body that had actually rested. No tossing and turning last night, no three AM spiral of anxious thoughts. Just sleep—deep and dreamless and exactly what I'd needed.

If I dreamed, I didn't remember. Sometimes that was a mercy.

I lay there for a moment longer, listening to the quiet of my apartment. The hum of the refrigerator. The distant sound of traffic from the street below. The particular stillness of early morning, before the city fully woke up. Then I threw off the covers and padded to the bathroom, my bare feet cold against the tile.

My reflection looked different these days. Not dramatically—I was still me, still the same face I'd always had. But there was something softer around my eyes now. Less tension in my jaw. The perpetual furrow between my brows had smoothed out, leaving behind something that almost looked like peace.

I pulled my hair up into a high bun, securing it with the scrunchie I kept on my wrist. A few strands escaped immediately, framing my face in loose waves, but I didn't bother fixing them. Today was a pajama day. A cooking day. A day for being gentle with myself.

I brushed my teeth, splashed water on my face, and headed for the kitchen.

The morning sun hit the kitchen tiles, and for once, I was moving faster than the light.

I was still in my pajamas—the soft cotton ones with the cloud pattern— But I didn't care. Today was a good day. Today was Pancake Day. I'd been dreaming about this for three days straight. Between the early shifts at the flower shop and the late-night study sessions for university, my diet had consisted mostly of convenience store sandwiches and lukewarm energy drinks. But not today. Today, I had the morning off, and I was going to reclaim my kitchen.

Pancakes.

Not the quick kind, not the frozen ones you microwave when you're too tired to

cook. Real pancakes. The kind that took time and attention, that filled the apartment with the smell of butter and vanilla and something like home. I gathered my ingredients with the practiced efficiency of someone who'd done this before—flour, sugar, baking powder, eggs, milk, a splash of vanilla extract. The mixing bowl was my favorite one, ceramic and hand-painted with little flowers around the rim. A gift from my grandmother, years ago, before things got complicated.

I turned on my speaker and scrolled through my playlists until I found the one I wanted. Energetic. Upbeat. The kind of music that made you want to dance while you cooked. The first notes filled the apartment, and I felt something loosen in my chest.

The batter came together easily.

I whisked it until it was smooth, no lumps, the consistency of thick cream. Then I heated the pan—cast iron, well-seasoned, another hand-me-down—and watched the butter melt and sizzle.

The batter sizzled as it hit the hot pan—a satisfying hiss that smelled like heaven.

The first pancake was always a test. Too hot, too cold, the batter spreading wrong. But today the universe was kind. The circle came out golden and perfect, and I flipped it with a satisfying little flourish that made me smile.

While the pancakes cooked, I prepared the fruit.

Strawberries first, washed and sliced into thin red crescents. Then bananas, cut into neat rounds that I arranged in a little pattern on my cutting board. The colors were so bright against the wood—red and yellow and the pale golden brown of the pancakes stacking on their plate. Beautiful. Simple. Mine. I arranged them on the plate with the focus of an artist, creating a smiley face before deciding that was too childish and scattering them artfully instead.

Then, the coffee.

The coffee was the final piece. I'd learned to make it the way I liked it—strong enough to actually wake me up, but with just enough milk to soften the bitterness. I poured the dark liquid into my favorite oversized yellow mug, then added the milk. A lot of milk. I watched the white swirl into the black until it turned a pale, creamy beige. I took a sip. Perfect. Just enough milk to barely taste the bitterness. I liked my life sweet, and my coffee sweeter.

The apartment smelled like vanilla and melted butter. It was the scent of safety.

I carried my breakfast to the low coffee table in the living room, dodging the obstacle course of my own comfort. My armchair in the corner was currently invisible, buried under a mountain of cushions and stuffed animals—a plush army I'd

collected over the years. Blankets were scattered across the sofa like colorful drifts of snow. It was messy, but it was mine.

The coffee table sat low to the ground, surrounded by floor cushions in various shades of pink and cream. My armchair—more of a nest, really—was piled high with throw pillows and stuffed animals, the accumulated comfort objects of a lifetime. Blankets were scattered across the sofa in artful disarray, soft and warm and always within reach. It looked messy to some people. Childish, maybe. To me, it looked like safety.

I settled onto my favorite cushion and arranged my breakfast in front of me, cross-legged, and looked at my creation.

The pancakes were perfect—fluffy, golden, still warm enough that the butter I'd added was melting into little pools. The fruit was bright and fresh. The coffee steamed gently, filling the air with that rich, familiar scent.

"Okay, you're too pretty to eat yet." I whispered to the pancakes.

The photo was important. Not for social media—I rarely posted there anymore, too aware of how the comparison game made me feel. But for the people who mattered. The people I wanted to share small joys with.

I angled my phone, catching the morning light, making sure the colors popped. The pancakes looked even better through the lens—inviting, homemade, the kind of breakfast that said I'm taking care of myself.

Click.

I examined the result. Good. Better than good.

I opened my messages.

First, Hong.

I attached the photo.

Me: Good morning! Made pancakes!! Hope your day is as fluffy as these look.

jealousy is a disease, get well soon

Then, William.

I hesitated for a second, my thumb hovering over his name. I knew what today was. I knew Est was going over there for the session.

I attached the photo.

Me: Good morning! Vitamin C for the soul. P'Will! I made pancakes this morning. I

hope your session goes well today.

I know you had another one scheduled with Est. You seemed better last time we talked, and I'm so proud of you for doing this exhibition. Good luck with the session today! I know it's going to go great!!

I added a few more encouraging emojis, then hit send before I could second-guess myself.

Things with William were... complicated.

Better than before, definitely. He was talking to me again—actually talking, not just those distant, distracted responses that made me feel invisible. He'd apologized for how he'd treated me that day in his apartment, when he'd pushed me out to make room for Est. The apology had been awkward, stilted, delivered through text rather than in person. But it had been real.

And he was trying. I could see it in the small things—the way he answered my messages now, the way he'd asked about the flower shop, the way he'd let me bring him dinner last week and actually ate it while I was there.

He was still fragile. Still struggling. But he was moving forward.

I hoped today would be another step in that direction.

I set the phone down and took a huge bite of pancake.

I chewed slowly, thinking about William. He had seemed better the last time we spoke—more present, less like he was fading into the walls of his penthouse. He was making business calls again. He was asking about the shop. I hoped the session with Est would go well. Est was... intense, but in a quiet way. He cared. I could see it. And William needed people who cared, even if he didn't know how to hold onto them.

My phone screen lit up.

I checked.

William's chat: Read.

No typing bubble. No emoji. Just seen.

I felt a tiny pinch in my chest, but I brushed it away with a sip of sugary coffee. That was William. He read things. He absorbed them. He didn't always reflect them back. At least he knew I was thinking of him. At least he knew I was still here, waving from the sidelines.

Then Hong.

I opened his message and immediately burst out laughing.

[Photo attached]

Hong: Morning! Your pancakes look better than mine...

My breakfast is under siege. Send reinforcements. Or pancakes.

The photo showed a plate of what looked like scrambled eggs and toast, slightly burnt at the edges, clearly made by someone who wasn't fully awake yet. But that wasn't what made me laugh.

It was the small hand creeping into the frame from the bottom corner, tiny fingers reaching toward a piece of toast like a little thief caught mid-heist.

I laughed out loud, the sound bright in the empty room.

I typed back:

Me: OMG whose hand is that???

Hong: My sister's kid. I'm on babysitting duty this morning. a menace.

Me: Surrender the egg. It's over.

Me: A CUTE menace though right?

Hong: The cutest. Don't tell her I said that.

I grinned at my phone, warmth spreading through my chest. I leaned back against the sofa, scrolling through his feed for a second. It felt nice. Easy. It had been a long time since I had a friend I spent so much time with. This easy back-and-forth, this sharing of small moments. Hong and I had been texting more and more lately—little updates throughout the day, photos of things that made us think of each other, jokes that only we understood.

It felt like friendship. The kind I'd been missing for longer than I wanted to admit.

University was... fine. I talked to people. We sat together in lecture halls, shared notes, complained about professors. But there was always a clock ticking on those interactions.

There were people at university, sure. Classmates I chatted with before lectures, study group members who exchanged notes and complaints about professors. But none of them seemed interested in maintaining anything beyond the surface level.

Most of them had stopped showing interest when they noticed that I had less free

time than they expected.

The flower shop took hours. And when I wasn't working, I was often tired—too tired for spontaneous hangouts, too drained for the kind of constant availability that seemed to be required for university friendships.

"You're always busy." they'd say, and I'd hear the accusation underneath. You're not trying hard enough. You're not fun enough. You're not worth the effort of accommodating.

So they'd drifted away, one by one, until my contact list was full of names I never texted and my weekends were full of silence.

But Hong was different.

Hong had his own quiet world at the studio. He understood working late. He understood tired. He didn't ask me to be the life of the party; he just sat next to me while I arranged flowers, or sent me pictures of his nephew stealing his breakfast.

He didn't make me feel like my busy life was a burden. He made it feel like we were just... parallel lines, moving in the same direction.

Hong understood about being busy. About having responsibilities that didn't pause just because you wanted to hang out. About the particular exhaustion of building something with your own hands, whether that something was a tattoo portfolio or a flower shop.

And more than that—Hong made time. He worked around my schedule, suggested activities that fit into the gaps, texted me on slow afternoons just to check in. He treated our friendship like something worth investing in.

I finished the last bite of pancake, wiping a smear of syrup from my lip.

William might be silent today. The university friends might be distant. But I had pancakes, I had my plushie mountain, and I had a friend who was currently fighting a toddler for his eggs.

It was a good morning.

The music had shifted to something softer now, the playlist cycling through its moods. I scrolled through my social media without really seeing it—the usual parade of curated lives and perfect moments that used to make me feel inadequate. It didn't hit as hard anymore. Maybe because I was learning to curate my own moments. Maybe because I had people to share them with now.

My phone buzzed again.

Hong: What are you doing today?

Me: Nothing planned! morning off. Probably going to clean a little.

Hong: Want company? I'll be free after noon.

I stared at the message, something fluttering in my stomach.

Me: Yes!! That would be really nice

Hong: Cool. I'll text you when the tiny menace is returned to his rightful owner.

I set my phone down and leaned back against my cushion pile, a smile lingering on my face.

I washed my dishes slowly, the warm water soothing on my hands.

The apartment was quiet now except for the soft music still playing from my speaker. Morning light had shifted from golden to white, the sun climbing higher, the day fully beginning.

I thought about William.

About his session with Est today. About the exhibition that was coming together, the one he'd been working toward for weeks. About how far he'd come from the man who couldn't leave his apartment, couldn't answer his phone, couldn't do anything but hide in the dark with his paintings.

He was trying. That mattered.

I hope it goes well, I thought, sending the wish out into the universe like a little prayer. I hope he doesn't sabotage himself. I hope Est is patient. I hope they figure out whatever is between them.

I didn't fully understand the situation with Est. William hadn't explained, and I hadn't pushed. But I'd seen the way William looked when Est's name came up—complicated and wounded and hopeful all at once. Something had happened between them. Something that mattered.

I hoped they could work it out.

My phone stayed silent.

William hadn't replied to my message, but that was okay. He'd read it. He knew I was thinking of him.

Sometimes that was enough.

I dried my hands and looked around my cozy apartment—the cushions and

blankets, the stuffed animals, the morning light making everything soft and warm. My space. My sanctuary. The place I'd built for myself when no one else was paying attention.

The cleaning was meditative.

I moved through my apartment with quiet purpose, straightening cushions, folding blankets, returning each stuffed animal to its proper place in the pile. The morning sun had climbed higher, filling the space with warm light that made even the dust motes look beautiful.

My bed came first—sheets pulled taut, pillows fluffed and arranged, the lavender comforter smoothed until there wasn't a single wrinkle. Some people might think it was silly to make a bed so carefully when I'd just mess it up again tonight. But there was something satisfying about it. Something that felt like respect. Like telling myself that the space I inhabited mattered. I arranged my favorite stuffed animal—a slightly lopsided bear named Mochi—right in the center. It looked ridiculous and perfect.

The vacuum came next.

I pushed it across the floor in slow, even strokes, watching the carpet fibers spring back in neat lines behind the machine. Under the coffee table. Around the armchair. Into the corners where dust liked to gather. The hum of the vacuum drowned out the music, but I didn't mind. The white noise was its own kind of peace. I chased dust bunnies from under the sofa and cleaned the rug where I spent so much time sitting.

When the floors were done, I moved to the table. A damp cloth, wiped in careful circles, removing the traces of breakfast and the general accumulation of living. The surface gleamed when I finished—clean and ready for whatever came next.

Finally, the bathroom.

This was always my least favorite part, but I'd learned to make it bearable. I put my earbuds in, turned up something upbeat, and let the music carry me through the scrubbing. Sink, toilet, mirror, shower, organizing the small army of skincare products I'd accumulated. Each surface sparkled when I was done, reflecting the light in clean white angles.

By the time I was done, the apartment smelled like lemon cleaner and fresh air. It felt lighter, somehow. Like I'd cleared away not just the physical dust, but the mental clutter too.

I looked at my reflection and nodded. Good.



The shower was a reward.

I stepped under the spray and let the warm water wash away the last traces of cleaning—the faint chemical smell of products, the thin film of sweat on my skin. My muscles relaxed as the heat seeped into them, and I stood there for a moment just breathing, letting the steam fill my lungs.

I washed my hair slowly, working the shampoo through the length of it, feeling the strands go slippery and smooth under my fingers. Then conditioner, left to sit while I scrubbed the rest of me. The body wash was something floral—jasmine, maybe, or honeysuckle—and the scent filled the small bathroom like a garden. When I finally stepped out, my skin was pink and warm, and I felt like a new person.

Choosing what to wear took longer than it should have.

Choosing an outfit was always my favorite part of the day. It felt like picking out a costume for the character I wanted to be. Today, I wanted to be soft. Comfortable. A little bit dreamy.

I stood in front of my closet, still wrapped in a towel, considering my options. Something comfortable. Something that made me feel like myself. But also something nice, because I was meeting Hong later, and I wanted to look... put together.

The white skirt caught my eye first. It was long, flowing almost to my ankles, the kind of skirt that swished when I walked. I loved how it moved—like water, like clouds, like something weightless and free. I pulled it on and watched the fabric settle around my legs.

For the top, I chose a pink tank top. Simple. Soft cotton, the color of strawberry milk.

But as I looked at myself in the mirror, I felt a familiar prickle of self-consciousness. Too much skin. Too exposed. The tank top left my shoulders bare, my arms visible, and even though there was nothing wrong with that, nothing shameful, I couldn't quite silence the voice that said too much.

I reached for the sweater.

It had been a gift from my father, years ago. One of those rare moments when he'd tried—really tried—to give me something I'd like. He'd gotten the size wrong, of course. Bought two sizes too big because he never could remember my measurements. Or maybe because he thought I was still growing. I didn't mind. It was soft, and it smelled faintly of the lavender sachets I kept in my drawers. A few

sizes too big, hanging off my shoulders and swallowing my hands. But I'd kept it anyway, because the gesture had mattered even if the execution was imperfect.

I pulled it on over the tank top.

The fabric was soft, slightly oversized, slipping off one shoulder to reveal a strip of pink underneath. It wasn't quite the polished look I'd imagined, but it felt right. Comfortable. Safe.

This is who I am, I thought, looking at my reflection. Layers and contradictions and a little bit messy. I could live with that.

My hair was still damp, so I worked quickly. Two simple braids, one on each side, starting behind my ears and falling past my shoulders. Nothing fancy. Just practical, keeping the strands out of my face while I worked. A few flyaways escaped immediately, curling around my forehead and temples. I didn't bother fixing them. Some battles weren't worth fighting.

I checked the time.

Close enough. I grabbed my bag, slipped on my favorite sandals, and headed out.

11:00

The walk to the flower shop was usually fifteen minutes.

The city felt alive. Sunlight bounced off shop windows, turning ordinary glass into mirrors of gold. People moved with purpose, heads down, phones out. I moved slower, swimming against the current.

Today, it took almost thirty. I'd barely made it a block before I spotted them—a cluster of kittens huddled near a drainage pipe, their mother watching from a safe distance. Four of them, maybe five, all different colors. Orange and grey and a tiny black one with white paws.

Oh no.

I knelt down on the pavement, heedless of my white skirt, and made the little clicking sounds that cats responded to. The mother eyed me warily, but the kittens were braver. One of them—the orange one—tottered toward me on unsteady legs.

"Hi, baby." I whispered. "Hi, little one."

The kitten sniffed my outstretched fingers, then rubbed its tiny head against my palm. The fur was impossibly soft. I could feel the vibration of a purr starting in its chest.

I stayed there for ten minutes, at least. Petting each kitten in turn, letting them climb over my sandals, watching them tumble over each other in that clumsy way that only baby animals could manage.

I'm going to be late, I thought.

Worth it, I decided.

Further down the street, a dog was waiting outside a café.

A golden retriever, patient and well-behaved, its leash looped around a bike rack. Its tail started wagging the moment it saw me approach.

"Oh, aren't you beautiful." I murmured, crouching down to scratch behind its ears. The dog leaned into my touch, eyes closing in bliss. Its fur was warm from the sun, soft and clean, and it smelled like someone who was very loved.

The owner emerged from the café a moment later—a middle-aged woman with a coffee in each hand.

"Sorry." I said, straightening up quickly. "I couldn't resist."

The woman laughed. "Don't apologize. She loves the attention. Don't you, Mango?"

Mango's tail wagged harder at the sound of her name.

I gave her one last pat and continued on my way, a smile lingering on my face.

The tattoo studio appeared on my right.

Ink & Ashes. The neon sign was lit despite the daylight, casting a soft purple glow against the window. I slowed my pace without quite meaning to, my eyes drawn to the glass. The main room was visible from the street—the waiting area with its worn leather chairs, the counter where Hong sometimes sat sketching between appointments. Today, there were people inside. A couple, maybe, looking at design samples on the wall. A young man sitting in one of the chairs, leg bouncing nervously.

But no Tui. No Hong.

They were probably in the back, I realized. Busy with clients. A full morning. I thought about going in, just for a moment. Waving hello. Seeing if Hong was free. But no. I had work. And I'd see him later anyway.

I walked on, my sandals clicking softly against the pavement.

The flower shop appeared around the next corner. It was small—just a narrow storefront wedged between a bakery and a dry cleaner—but it had always felt like something bigger to me. Something magical. The windows were crowded with arrangements, colors spilling against the glass like stained light. Even from outside, I could smell it—the green, growing scent of living things.

I paused at the entrance, my eyes finding the photos.

They were tucked into the corner of the window display, nearly hidden among the flowers. Three of them, framed in simple wood. William's mother—Auntie, I'd always called her—smiling in each one. In the first, she was young, holding a newborn William in her arms. In the second, she stood behind the counter of this very shop, flowers blooming around her like a crown. In the third, she was older, her face lined but still beautiful, her eyes full of the quiet joy that I remembered so well.

I'm still here, I told her silently. I'm still taking care of it. Taking care of him.

The door chimed as I pushed it open.

"Good morning, Lego!"—the older woman who worked the morning shifts—looked up from the register with a warm smile. She'd been here almost as long as Auntie had, and she treated the shop like it was her own. Which, in many ways, it was.

"Good morning, P'!" I returned the smile, weaving my way past the display buckets toward the back. "Busy today?"

"Not too bad. A few orders came in overnight—they're on the board for you."

"I'll get started right away."

The back room was cooler than the front, the air thick with moisture from the flowers kept in storage. I clocked in at the little terminal by the door, watching the screen flash green in acknowledgment, then made my way to my station.

My apron hung on its usual hook—pale green, slightly stained with chlorophyll and pollen, soft from a hundred washings. I tied it around my waist, feeling the familiar weight settle against my hips. Gloves came next. Thin latex, to protect my hands from thorns and the particular irritation that some stems could cause. I pulled them on with practiced efficiency, flexing my fingers to check the fit. And then I turned to the flowers.

The orders for today were varied.

I started with the experimental ones—the arrangements that required more thought, more creativity. A customer had requested "something wild but elegant" for an anniversary, which I interpreted as a cascade of tropical orchids mixed with unexpected greenery. Monstera leaves, maybe. Something with texture and movement.

My hands moved without conscious direction, selecting stems, trimming ends, arranging and rearranging until the composition felt right. The orchids were deep purple, almost black at the center, and I paired them with white anthurium and cascading strings of green amaranthus. Wild but elegant. I stepped back to examine my work.

Perfect.

The next order was simpler—a birthday bouquet, cheerful and bright. I reached for the gerbera daisies, the sunflowers, the spray roses in shades of pink and orange. These arrangements were easier, less demanding. But I gave them the same attention, the same care. Every bouquet deserved to be beautiful. Every flower deserved to be seen.

The red roses came last.

They were always popular—simple but timeless, the kind of gift that said I love you without needing words. The shop kept them in abundance, dozens of stems in various stages of bloom, waiting to be assembled into bouquets. I selected the best ones. The fullest blooms, the straightest stems, the deepest red. I stripped the lower leaves, trimmed the ends at an angle, arranged them in my hand with practiced precision.

One dozen. Two dozen. Three.

Each bouquet was identical in structure but unique in character—the particular curl of a petal, the exact shade of crimson, the way the light caught the velvet surface. I wrapped them in paper, tied them with ribbon, set them aside for pickup.

My hands knew this work. Had known it since I was young, watching Auntie move through the shop like a dancer, her fingers gentle on each bloom.

"Flowers are living things," she'd told me once. "They deserve our respect. Our attention. Our love."

I'd never forgotten.

The morning passed in a rhythm of petals and stems. I fell into the meditation of it—the repetitive motions, the soft rustle of paper, the cool touch of water on my gloved hands. The music from my phone played softly through my earbuds, a quiet backdrop to the work. Every now and then, I'd glance at the photos in the window. At Auntie's smile. At the legacy I was carrying forward in her absence.

William would have the session by now. The one with Est. I hoped it was going well. Hoped he was letting himself be seen, be photographed, be known. I hoped he was letting someone in. But that was his journey, not mine. All I could do was be here—in this shop, with these flowers—and trust that the people I loved were finding their

way.

Please let it go well, I wished silently, tying a silk ribbon around the stems. Please let them figure it out.

I took a deep breath of the flower-scented air and picked up another rose.

This was a good day. A quiet day. A day full of small, beautiful things. And in a few hours, I would see my friend.

Everything was going to be okay.

The mid-morning rush at the shop was steady but manageable. Between customers, I slipped my phone out of my apron pocket, balancing it carefully so I didn't get any stray petals or water droplets on the screen.

First, the email.

My heart gave a little jump when I saw the sender.

They were casting for a new campaign and they wanted me for a callback. A group shoot with other models.

I leaned against the worktable, biting my lip to keep from grinning too wide. Modeling wasn't just a hobby anymore; it was something I wanted. Something I craved. The ability to transform, to be someone else for a few hours, to see myself through a lens that captured beauty I sometimes forgot I had. I typed out a quick, professional reply confirming my availability. Thank you for the opportunity. I look forward to meeting the team.

Sent.

I took a breath, feeling a thrill of excitement buzz under my skin. This could be real. This could be something.

The second notification was from Hong.

A photo I must have missed while I was deep in the rose arrangements—my phone had been on silent, tucked in my apron pocket. It was just a hand—Hong's long, ink-stained fingers gentle around a tiny, chubby wrist. The child's head was barely visible in the corner of the frame, just a blur of dark hair and a hint of a rounded cheek.

The caption was simple: Hostage situation.

I snorted, covering my mouth with a gloved hand. It was so Hong—dry humor masking obvious affection. The way he held that little hand was so careful, so

protective. It made my chest ache in a soft, sweet way.

I scrolled down to see his most recent update. A photo taken from his station at the studio, angled to show the waiting area I'd passed earlier. It was fuller now—three people on the couches, one flipping through a magazine, another scrolling on their phone.

Hong: I hope none of them ruin my job by going to the beach or I'll be really upset

The aggressive emojis next to his legitimate artist grievance made me giggle. Hong took his aftercare instructions very seriously. He once gave me a twenty-minute lecture on sunscreen.

Then, inevitably, my thumb hovered over William's chat. My message from this morning—the photo of the pancakes, the good luck wish—sat there.

Read 8:35 AM.

No reply. No typing indicator. Just the silent acknowledgment that he had seen it.

A small, familiar weight settled in my stomach.

It was fine. He was busy. He was in a session with Est. He was William.

But part of me—the part that still remembered being dismissed, being forgotten—couldn't help but sting a little. It's not about you, I reminded myself firmly. He's working. He's healing. Don't make up a story where there isn't one.

I swiped out of the chat before I could dwell on it.

Back to work. back to the roses. Back to the things I could control, the beauty I could create with my own two hands. I put my phone away and picked up a stem of baby's breath, tucking it gently between two crimson blooms.

One thing at a time. One flower at a time.

The afternoon sun was starting to slant golden by the time I clocked out. Five o'clock. My shift was over, my apron hung on its hook, my hands washed clean of pollen and chlorophyll. I should have been heading home to change, to freshen up, to text Hong about dinner plans.

Instead, my thoughts kept circling back to William.

But my mind wasn't quiet. All day, the silence from William had been a low-grade hum in the back of my head. Read. Ignored. It shouldn't have bothered me—I knew how he got when he was working—but today felt different. Today was the session with Est. Today was important.

The unanswered message from this morning. The read receipt that sat there like a small, silent rejection. The session with Est that should have ended hours ago.

Maybe it went well, I told myself as I stepped out of the flower shop, the door chiming behind me. Maybe he's happy. Maybe they worked things out. Maybe he'll have news to share. The idea took root before I could stop it. A quick visit. Just to check in. Just to see his face and know that he was okay. Then I would text Hong. Then we would get dinner. Then everything would be fine.

Curiosity, concern, maybe a little bit of hope that things were finally going right for him—it all propelled me into a taxi instead of toward the subway station.

"Just a quick visit." I told myself, watching the city blur past the window. "Check in. See his face. Maybe hear about a second date. Then dinner with Hong."

I pictured it: William opening the door with that rare, genuine smile, maybe a little tired but happy. Telling me the session went well. Telling me Est was coming back. It was a nice picture.

The taxi ride was short.

I sat in the back seat, watching the city blur past the window, my bag clutched in my lap. The driver had the radio on—some pop song I half-recognized—and the melody filled the silence I couldn't quite bring myself to break. William's building appeared sooner than expected, all glass and steel catching the late afternoon light. I paid the fare, stepped out onto the sidewalk, and stood there for a moment, looking up.

Seventeen floors.

Just a brief visit, I reminded myself. Just to say hello.